Charlotte Elizabeth "Betty" Webb, née Vine-Stevens

Bletchley Park October 1941 - May 1945. Military Section, German Police. and Japanese Military Sub-sections. Washington DC June - September 1945. British Joint Services Mission. Interviewed February 2012

Joining up

I was 18 and at domestic science college near Shrewsbury, and several of us decided that we ought to be serving our country rather than just making sausage rolls. We left before the end of the course, which must have caused our parents a lot of angst.

I volunteered for the ATS in 1941and did my basic training in Wrexham at the Royal Welch Fusiliers Barracks; from there I was taken for interview in London at Devonshire House and then sent immediately to Bletchley. At the training centre everyone was given the opportunity to show what they could do and what they would be interested in. I didn't chime with anything very much, but I told them that I spoke German and I think that was probably why they gave me the opportunity to go to Bletchley Park.

Arrival at Bletchley Park

After my interview in London, I was given a rail warrant to Bletchley there and then. I went back to Euston, picked up my bags, and got on the train. Although I didn't go home for some time, I could telephone my family occasionally using the telephones under the stairs in the Mansion. They could write to me via an address in London, which was a post office box number and then the letters would be brought to Bletchley Park by dispatch rider.

When I arrived at Bletchley, I was put straight into the office upstairs over the ballroom, and that was where I did the registering of messages, right from day one; there wasn't any training. We were told very little about what we were doing or why, we were just told to get on with the job. None of us understood the whole picture, certainly not the more junior people like me and with the constraints of the Official Secrets Act, we didn't talk about it outside our immediate office.

Official Secrets Act

We were taken individually into the first room on the left as you go into the Mansion and faced by a rather severe looking captain in the Army who had a gun on the table. We were given the Official Secrets Act to read, which is pretty lengthy and frightening. We knew that we had to abide by the rules within it and sign it and not speak about anything outside the four walls for as long as it took.

Bletchley Park Oral History Project

© 2022 Bletchley Park Trust

The Work

Other people were assigned to huts, to Hut 3, 6, 11 or whatever. I worked mainly in the Mansion in Major Tester's department, not in the Testery but for Major Tester himself in the early days from 1941. I was briefly in Hut 4, which is now the café, and also in Block F which no longer exists. I was very briefly in another hut, the number of which I forget, but mainly in the Mansion and Block F.

I very, very vaguely knew the purpose of our work because I knew that the messages came in from our signals units throughout the world, that they were taken down in Morse code. All we saw were groups of letters and figures and I knew that they had to be decoded. I don't think I ever really understood the end product as I do now. I mean I know now exactly how many processes had to be gone through to make sense of the messages.

In Major Tester's department every single message that came in had to be registered. Overall I believe there were some 10,000 messages a day, not all in our particular office but within the park. Every single one had to be very carefully registered by date and there was a little figure in the corner of most of them, which again was important because I think that gave some indication as to where the messages might have come from.

The messages were registered on little cards, about postcard size, and then put into shoeboxes or whatever else we could find to keep them in some sort of order, and they had to be in strict order. Major Tester or Colonel Thompson would call for a particular date or a particular indicating sign, and we would have to find everything relating to that particular reference for them. We didn't have any equipment in those days. At my level, one was not privy to the end product so a task didn't make any more sense when I had finished it.

When I worked in the Mansion for Major Tester, I only saw the messages in their raw state, as they were intercepted. All we saw were groups of five letters or five figures, we never saw anything that had been decoded or translated. Again, because at my level we were so tied to the fact that nothing was discussed outside our own offices, I couldn't relate any of the work to specific events during the war.

I knew that Major Tester was a translator because his German was absolutely perfect. He had worked in a commercial situation on the continent before the war and was fully versed in German.

I was then in Hut 4 for a short while, the one alongside the left-hand side of the Mansion which I think dealt with naval codes. I wasn't there for very long

Bletchley Park Oral History Project

© 2022 Bletchley Park Trust

before I was taken over to the Japanese section, which was in the newly built Block F where I was working with a Mr Parkin, who was a Foreign Office official as far as I know. He was not in uniform. I was given the job of paraphrasing the translated Japanese messages. There again, I don't know exactly where they went, after I'd paraphrased them. They were put into double envelopes with rather an obscure address system, with just numbers, then put into the outer envelope and as far as I know they were taken, possibly to London, by dispatch rider. That was very secret, we were not told exactly where they went.

I understand now that the reason for paraphrasing was because for messages to be sent on, they had to be disguised. If the enemy had picked up ongoing messages as translated, they would have realised that we'd broken the codes. This meant that I had to put a message into other words, so it was difficult for anybody to decide where it had come from. I don't know if I was selected for this task but I suppose something I'd said or done made them realise that I was capable of doing it. I did this job in Block F until May 1945 when I was sent to America where I did the same type of work in the Pentagon.

I think I had an aptitude for paraphrasing because I was taught at home under the Parents' National Educational Union by my mother, who was a qualified teacher. She always encouraged us to relate stories in our own words. We would read something in the Bible, for instance, and then we were told to write it down in our own words, meaning the same thing but not necessarily quoting the exact wording. I can't remember anything significant about any of the messages I paraphrased, there were too many and I haven't retained the information. I have put something into my little book to give people an idea of what was involved.

I never did use my German at Bletchley. I asked Major Tester one day if I could help him with the translation and he *gave* me a little test with a newspaper and then told me that my German wasn't quite good enough and I accepted that. I'd spoken German all my life, but never really studied it in any depth, it was very colloquial German and not sufficiently advanced for me to help with the translations.

During World War 1, on the day that war broke out, my mother had been travelling on a train through Germany to take up a teaching post in a school near Leipzig. She spent over a year there and had some difficulty in getting back home. She always said that there's nothing worse than being in a country not being able to speak their language, so we always had German or Swiss nannies and we spoke German from the word go.

Bletchley Park Oral History Project

© 2022 Bletchley Park Trust

The man in London who interviewed me, did so in German, but it was very elementary and I don't suppose he would have had any idea of the in-depth knowledge that would be needed for translating.

Thinking back, I certainly was very happy at Bletchley Park in the main. I got a bit bored on one occasion and thought it would be nice to be transferred to something else, perhaps driving or whatever, but I was told very firmly that once you're in there, you don't go out.

People remembered

As well as Major Tester, there was a retired Colonel Thompson, a Sergeant Major Jones, "Tubby" (I don't know his surname), a Sergeant Mesurier (I don't think it was the same man as the actor John Le Mesurier) and there was a Captain Shiner. That's all I remember.

Major Tester was a very kindly man, very gentlemanly and very patient. I don't remember much about Colonel Thompson except that he said I had an unusual name (my maiden name was Vine-Stevens). It turned out that he had served with my uncle, Rex Vine-Stevens, in the Middle East.

We had to work hard, but we did have a bit of fun on Wednesday mornings when we had to do gas mask drill. This meant that our gasmasks were at the ready, and we worked in them for 20 minutes. Tubby used to sing *In The Mood* in his gas mask and make the most excruciating noises.

When I worked briefly in Hut 4, I remember a very handsome sergeant called Anthony Fenwiggin. I commented to one of the other girls that he was alright but probably married. He then poked his head round the door and said boo. It was very embarrassing and I learnt to be more discrete.

I worked in Hut 4 for a Lieutenant Parker who used to write all his reports but when he ran out of paper, he'd write not just from top to bottom of the page, but all round the edges. I then had to try and decipher his writing and type it out which was very difficult.

I also remember seeing Colossus arriving, just very briefly, into one of the huts which I think was opposite where the Bombe is now. Colossus was very large.

Shift work

I didn't cope too well with the shift work. Eight to four was alright and four to midnight, but midnight to eight was very disturbing to one's body, sleeping in the daytime, if you were lucky enough to be able to get to sleep in the daytime and very often you couldn't. Eating during the night was very upsetting to one's system; I think most people found that. As far as I was concerned, whether or not you had a night shift depended a bit on the

Bletchley Park Oral History Project

© 2022 Bletchley Park Trust

workload; it was fairly regular and then sometimes I was put back on normal weekday work.

Accommodation and food

I was billeted, first of all, at a little village called Bradwell which was what I would call a railway town, not far from Wolverton. That was a disaster because it was very, very small; in fact the first night there I travelled up with a girl who had escaped from Brussels. It seemed that Germans were in one side of the house and she was in the other, but she managed to get away and joined the ATS. She was also interviewed in Devonshire House and was a linguist. We were taken to this billet in Bradwell and found to our horror that we had to share not only a room, but the bed. Eventually I asked if we could be moved and I went to a delightful family called Oxley who lived at Salisbury House in Loughton, which is now part of Milton Keynes. I was very happy there; it was a lovely family, very big house, and they had a big garden and produced their own vegetables and fruit in the kitchen garden.

Compared with what other people had to put up with as far as rations were concerned, we were extremely well fed. The woman of the house was cooking for her own family of five and two or three of us. It was always very good indeed. From time to time there were others billeted there with me and at one point there were three of us. I remember Barbara Brown, she was ATS, and Jessie Matthews (not the singer) who was also in the ATS. I don't remember the third one but I believe there was another one there. We all lived very happily.

Towards the end of the war it was decided to build camps at the side of the park for both the Army and the Air Force and we all moved out of the billets into the camps. The camps aren't there anymore, they've been built on. In some ways the camp was very much better in that we could walk to work and didn't have to be bussed in every day or every shift, so from that point of view and socially it was much better. The living conditions, however, were very basic and uncomfortable.

The huts that we slept in had been thrown up in a great hurry, they had bitumen floors and very thin walls so that many times in bad winters one's flannel would be frozen by the morning. We were young, however and didn't mind about that. One of the things we used to do was play a hectic game of table tennis in the mess before bed, and rush in before we got cold again. The washing accommodation in the camp was also very basic. There was a row of washstands, probably about 10 or 12, and we stood on what we called duckboards, which were wooden slats so that water could run away. We had baths but of course water was limited; I think the limit was four inches and there was always a queue. We sat on a concrete floor to wait our turn before we could bathe.

Bletchley Park Oral History Project

© 2022 Bletchley Park Trust

The huts were meant for about 18 people but they crammed a great deal more than that in and, as a result, we found it more comfortable to arrange our beds so that we were head to tail, otherwise it was quite difficult when you got up in the morning because there wasn't much room between the beds to put your clothes on. In the summer, and I remember a very hot summer when it was difficult to get to sleep, we used to go out into the fields at the back. I'm sure if we'd been caught we'd have been disciplined, but nobody did catch us, so that was alright. We slept on very uncomfortable and typical army beds. You had three palliasses to lie on and these had a nasty habit of moving about in the night so most of us sacrificed a blanket to make a sort of envelope of these palliasses to stop them slithering around.

On Monday evenings we had to clean up and polish the floors, which was quite ridiculous because the flooring was a sort of bitumen. Some of the administrators who didn't have the slightest idea what sort of work we were doing, tried to be terribly military and made us polish these awful floors. We had just one box for our personal belongings along with one shelf and a few hangers.

Food was basic army rations, rather uninteresting: dried egg. a certain amount of vegetables and not very much meat. I remember after I came back from America, I went to register just for a few days and by that time things were getting easier and we even had a grapefruit for breakfast, which was a real treat. Earlier in the war, it was a case of survival and you just accepted what was put in front of you.

Pay

The pay was normal Army pay, off the top of my head I can't remember how much. We started off in training centre with about ten shillings and sixpence a week, but that was on top of all our kit, which was issued free of course. There were no deductions made for rent and that 10/6 took us quite a long way. We were able to go to the pictures and buy a particular brand of toothpaste. We didn't want for anything. Out of that 10/6 we were expected to save a certain amount.

Transport

We were bussed in from the billet. There was a big system of bussing people in from all the villages round about, and some of the pubs. I don't know any more about it than that but certainly there was quite a large area which was used for billeting people. I think some of them were probably in places like Bedford and Leighton Buzzard and so on. I don't remember the colour of the buses; they were old fashioned by today's standards and fairly uncomfortable but they got us to and fro. When we got to Bletchley we had

Bletchley Park Oral History Project

© 2022 Bletchley Park Trust

to show our passes at the gate before we could go in. If you hadn't got your pass with you, you didn't go in.

The huts

I can't remember the colour of the huts clearly, but I think they were a sort of grey sandy colour and all the same, although I never had occasion to go into most of them. In fact, we were not encouraged to go into each other's buildings, it was not done. I don't recall anything about the windows, doors or any internal colours or decoration, or the height of the blast walls. Bear in mind I was in the Mansion and Block F, which was new, but I haven't any memory of bright colours, I would say the huts were fairly subdued. Block F had a concrete floor and radiators. I understand that the huts had stoves and if they were anything like the ones we had in the sleeping huts, they would have been pretty awful and not very controllable.

The toilets in the Mansion were very much as they are today, rather plain, and white. There must have been a toilet in Block F but I don't remember it.

Time off

We were blessed with a great many activities outside work. There were always concerts run by Herbert Murrell, who was a professional musician; he also ran a Bach choir. We had a madrigal society and a gramophone group club. I'm musical so I went to the gramophone concerts, the Bach choir and I sang in the madrigal society. Every now and again the drama group would put on a play and of course we had table tennis and darts and eventually we had tennis because when Churchill came to visit he asked about the recreational side of things. When he discovered we didn't have tennis courts, he ordered them to be put in, pronto and they were.

We worked hard and we played hard. In theory we should have had a day's leave every week, but it didn't always work out because of the shift system and the pressure of work. Leave was always great fun because we were halfway between Oxford and Cambridge, and not too far from London. I occasionally went home, which was near Ludlow, but it wasn't a very easy journey in those days. If I didn't go home, or anywhere else, I took my bicycle and used to cycle round the countryside, which in those days was great because there was hardly any traffic.

To America

I had been at Bletchley Park since September 1941 and in May 1945 I was shipped out to America. This was a complete surprise to me. One or two of us had been interviewed with a view to going to India, but I had a funny feeling that I wouldn't be going. I went into the office as usual, and my boss

Bletchley Park Oral History Project

© 2022 Bletchley Park Trust

told me I wasn't going to India, I was going to Washington. So I had my leave and went off to Washington via the holding unit in Radnor Place in London.

I had expected to be put on a boat fairly soon after that, but it was a public holiday weekend and I didn't hear any more. I learned afterwards that I hadn't been put on the boat because the movement order hadn't been opened. The officer who was in charge of movement orders was away on leave, and it was some time before the envelope was opened. In the meantime, I'd phoned up Bletchley and told them I was still in England, wondering what was happening. They were a bit puzzled and sent me back to the War Office for another interview, where I was told I'd be going out by flying boat and it was going to cost them a lot of money. I replied that I was sorry but it was nothing to do with me. Anyway, as instructed I went down to Poole harbour and flew out on a Sunderland flying boat which took something like 30 hours.

I had been told only that I would be joining a British section out there. I already knew the man I'd be working with because he'd been at Bletchley as well. He was an American, Colonel O'Connor in the Pentagon.

There were a lot of British people there, another I knew from Bletchley, a Captain John Burrows and a girl I had been friends with before who was a civilian worker at Bletchley. Her father was the vicar of Leighton Buzzard. There were many others who I got to know. I don't know how many British people worked in Washington but there seemed to be a lot.

My first impression of the Pentagon was that it was unbelievably huge. 32,000 people could be served for lunch; almost beyond comprehension. You didn't move anywhere without passes – something that was all set up when I got to America. We were issued with the Canadian summer uniform in a sort of rayon material, which was very pleasant because Washington can be extremely hot. We certainly couldn't have survived in khaki.

I was the only ATS girl in the Pentagon, the others were doing other work, but again one didn't talk about that side of it. One or two of us were billeted in a hotel called the Cairo, which is still there, and I shared accommodation with a girl from Hull. We got on very well, especially as we had the common interest in getting rid of the cockroaches before we could get to sleep at night. They were everywhere and would fall off the ceiling onto your bed. There was no air conditioning in this particular hotel, and it was very hot. You dripped the whole time and one's uniform was always soaking wet.

Special buses picked people up all over the city and took us in to work at the Pentagon, where I was doing exactly as I had done in Block F, paraphrasing translated Japanese messages. I can't remember any of them now. I think it is because we shut our minds to everything, because that's

Bletchley Park Oral History Project

© 2022 Bletchley Park Trust

how we were trained to abide by the Official Secrets Act. There was no need for me to remember them once I'd done them and it was a long time ago. The number of messages I worked on over the course of a week would vary because there were messages coming in from different signal stations and it would depend on how many the enemy was sending out anyway. Probably hundreds.

Work there ended after the atomic bombs were dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. All that was needed after that was for us to pack up and wait for a movement order so we could come home again, which we did in October.

Off duty in America

We had a very good social life in America. Nothing very organised, but we were quite a friendly bunch and went to concerts and used to go shopping. The relative freedom compared with Britain was lovely. There was a certain amount of food rationing but it wasn't very much compared with what we'd had at home. Of course, there were lots of things to buy which we couldn't buy in England.

I had a very pleasant weekend with one of my American army friends. She and her family invited me up to Providence in Rhode Island. It was the fall and everything was just turning lovely gold colours and so on. The Americans were very pleasant but there was a certain amount of anti-British feeling amongst them. I felt it once when I wasn't in uniform and introduced as Betty from England and I noticed a sudden silence. I was once called a bloody limey in the streets. I think, however, it was a certain type of person who really wasn't aware of the importance of the situation. Some hadn't wanted America to come into the war and some still had a grudge, even though they knew in the end that they had to take part.

Keeping the secret

I became fairly confident in answering the question about what I was doing, and would say, I had a boring secretarial job and pass it off like that. I don't remember my parents ever asking but my father had been in the army in the first world war, and I think he knew that you don't pursue that line of questioning. Nobody else ever asked me a question, apart from my landlady. I would give the usual pat answer and laugh it off and then we'd talk about something that had been said on the wireless. I understand that Bletchley Park was not known then for what it was and remember that the buildings in the park couldn't be seen from the outside. I really believe that most people in the locality didn't know it was there or what was going on.

The only amusing reference to what was going on was when a member of the RAF regiment that was guarding us was playing silly Bs with his sergeant

© 2022 Bletchley Park Trust

Bletchley Park Oral History Project

major one day. The sergeant major told him that if he didn't behave himself, he would put him inside with the rest of that mad lot. I think that's how people in the locality thought of it, a place where there were some very strange people who didn't seem quite right.

After the war

After my experience of being in America, it was very strange to return to post-war Britain; things felt a bit flat. I was fortunate in that I had a good home to go to and went home to help my mother for a while before starting to look for a job. You couldn't talk to a prospective employer about what you'd been doing and some people didn't understand. That being said, I'm one of those people who has been so fortunate throughout my life. It just so happened that the headmaster of Ludlow Grammar School near where I lived had been at Bletchley, and he gave me a job without questions. He had been senior to me, a major I think, and I'd no idea which hut he was in or what he'd been doing at Bletchley and we never spoke about it. His name was Tony Leatham.

The secret is out

In July 1975 I was working in Birmingham and on the opposite side of the road, saw someone that I'd seen at Bletchley and knew only as Biddy, but I didn't know who she was or what she worked at. She called out that our secret was out, and that was the first I knew about it. I wasn't at all impressed. I still felt that I had no reason to talk about it and didn't, for years. It wasn't until the 1990s when I was asked if I would give talks about Bletchley, and I suddenly realised that, yes, I could, I'm free, I don't have to worry any more. I hadn't let it worry me previously because I had put it behind me but I was never able to tell my parents as they died before 1975 and my husband wasn't particularly interested.

Since I've started giving talks, I've written an enormous amount about my time there. I've been back a lot and to most of the reunions and it's become my life again. I don't advertise but word has got around and I talk to anyone who asks me. I suppose in the main it has been Probus and Rotary groups and occasionally schools. Also, the University of the Third Age, the Women's Institute and groups that are part of the Conservative Association. I can now give them a picture of the whole process involving the messages. I also talk about the people doing the work and how we lived.

I'm very glad that I was chosen to go, I don't understand why I was chosen but it did me a lot of good, it taught me a lot about life. In a way, it was like a university and I met a lot of very nice people. I feel honoured to have been there.

Bletchley Park Oral History Project

© 2022 Bletchley Park Trust

Bletchley Park Trust Oral History Project. © 2022 Bletchley Park Trust.

Permission must be obtained to reproduce or publish any content from this write-up. Please contact: enquiries@bletchleypark.org.uk

Bletchley Park Oral History Project

© 2022 Bletchley Park Trust